

Institution: King's College London		
Unit of Assessment: 23 Education		
Title of case study: Strengthening grassroots youth work and its evaluation through youth-centred approaches		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2011 – 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Tania de St Croix	Senior Lecturer	From April 2015
Period when the claimed impact occurred: April 2015 – Dec 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact

Following a decade of spending cuts, grassroots open youth work (youth clubs, street-based and online youth work) has faced significant challenges. In providing an evidence base for the value of youth work and more youth-centred evaluation practices, research led by Dr Tania de St Croix at King's College London has contributed to new investment in the sector and prompted change to accountability and evaluation policies and practices. Further, the research has bolstered youth-centred developments in the daily practice of open youth work and the training of professional and volunteer youth workers, ultimately benefitting some of society's most marginalised young people.

2. Underpinning research

A decade of substantial cuts to youth work provision across the UK has resulted in the depletion of a resource that is open to young people by choice, engages with them on their terms, and attracts marginalised young people who are less likely to access mainstream services. At the same time, there has been an increasing policy emphasis on assessing youth services through predetermined, measurable outcomes. Two research studies led by de St Croix have examined the impact of these developments on grassroots open youth work; that is youth work that takes place in youth clubs, street-based youth work, and youth work with specific groups (eg young women, young refugees, black young people, LGBTQ young people, or disabled young people). Specifically, the research has documented practitioners' and young people's perspectives and experiences, highlighting, mapping and analysing how a combination of austerity and the increased use of outcome-based monitoring procedures has transformed practice [1,2,3,4] and is threatening the long-term future of youth work [5]. The research has also identified existing good practice in evaluation and articulated the case for more youth-centred qualitative techniques [5] and grassroots narrative methods [6] that are more congruent with the values of youth work.

Grassroots youth work practice in a changing policy context

Through policy analyses, participant observation and in-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups with 35 youth workers, the first study, published as a monograph, *Grassroots youth work: Policy, passion and resistance in practice*, showed how part-time and volunteer youth workers, who work directly with young people facing complex and challenging circumstances, are themselves marginalised in decision-making relating to policy and practice [1]. The research also illuminated the ways in which target cultures have distorted their practice by, for example, requiring formal evaluation methods (such as form-filling and database tracking). This has made it more difficult for them to develop person-centred, trusting relationships with young people who are inclined to be suspicious of formal measurement and intrusive tracking mechanisms [2]. In a co-authored paper with Ian McGimpsey from the University of Birmingham, researchers at King's have conceptualised these changes as being informed by neoliberal logic, resulting in services and projects being ranked and compared according to their economic outcomes [3]. This contrasts with a tradition of youth work that is based on a commitment to critical dialogue with young people and the creation of informal education opportunities that start from young people's agendas [4].

The value and evaluation of youth work

A follow-up study, funded by the ESRC, 'Rethinking Impact, Evaluation and Accountability in Youth Work' [7] examined how evaluation and accountability mechanisms are used in youth work, how young people and practitioners conceptualise the value of youth work and what approaches to evaluation and accountability are most appropriate in relation to practice. Qualitative data collection comprised participant observation in a variety of youth work settings in five regions across England (including urban and rural areas with varied demographics) alongside in-depth interviews, focus groups and youth participatory research with 140 young people, practitioners, managers and policy influencers. The study took place in a policy context in which youth organisations were encouraged by government (through the Centre for Youth Impact, see section 4) and funding agencies to prove their effectiveness through outcomes measurement. Conventional outcomes measurement approaches are problematic in youth work settings because they determine efficacy on the basis of predefined, discrete outcomes, whereas in youth work, there is no specific beginning or end and diverse needs may only emerge during the process of engagement.

The study generated new understandings and articulations of how youth work makes a vital contribution to young people's everyday lives in the here and now, by providing an in-depth analysis of the value and importance of providing trusted relationships, safe yet informal spaces, and critical conversations around personal challenges and wider social issues [5]. The research has, in addition, revealed and unpacked the ways in which evaluation and monitoring practices are experienced by young people and youth workers as inappropriate: intrusive, time-consuming, overly formal, impractical; and as reinforcing adult-defined deficit narratives about young people [5]. The research has shown how, in contrast, young people and youth workers value accountability mechanisms that are rooted in practice, are sensitive to the complexities of young people's lives and avoid deficit labels [5].

The research has also identified and illuminated the problematic ways in which outcomes measurement shapes overall provision towards short-term targeted projects and away from long-term open provision [5]. This is intensified by what de St Croix, with colleagues from King's and the University of Birmingham, have named a 'social investment machine', in which evaluation techniques developed within and outside government attribute a financial value to outcomes and services, further disadvantaging practices that are less amenable to this kind of evaluation [3].

To address the need for a more equitable, nuanced approach to accountability that reflects the complexities of practice and the skilled nature of youth work, the research has made the case for, and recommended, mixed qualitative evaluation processes (comprising, for example, interviews, focus groups, storytelling and creative methods) and the greater involvement of young people and practitioners in decisions about evaluation and accountability [5,6].

3. References to the research

- [1] De St Croix, T. (2016) *Grassroots youth work: Policy, passion and resistance in practice*. (1st ed.) Bristol: Policy Press. DOI:10.1332/policypress/9781447328599.001.0001
- [2] De St Croix, T. (2018) Youth work, performativity and the new youth impact agenda: Getting paid for numbers? *Journal of Education Policy*, 33(3), 414-438. DOI:10.1080/02680939.2017.1372637
- [3] De St Croix, T., McGimpsey, I. & Owens, J. (2019) Feeding young people to the social investment machine: the financialisation of public services. *Critical Social Policy*, 40(3), 450-470. DOI:10.1177/0261018319854890
- [4] Taylor, T., Connaughton, P., de St Croix, T., Davies, B. & Grace, P. (2018) The impact of neoliberalism upon the character and purpose of English youth work and beyond. In: P. Alldred, F. Cullen, K. Edwards & D. Fusco (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Youth Work Practice* (pp.84-97). SAGE Publications Ltd. DOI:10.4135/9781526416438
- [5] Doherty, L. & de St Croix, T. (2019) The everyday and the remarkable: Valuing and evaluating youth work. *Youth and Policy: The Journal of Critical Analysis*. Online open

access publication published 18th November 2019 at: youthandpolicy.org/articles/valuing-and-evaluating-youth-work/

- [6] De St Croix, T. (2020) Reimagining accountability: Storytelling workshops for evaluation in and beyond youth work. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*. DOI:10.1080/14681366.2020.1855231

Funding

- [7] De St Croix, T. (2018-2021). Rethinking impact, evaluation and accountability in youth work. Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC): GBP218,250. ES/R004773/1).

4. Details of the impact

In the largely practice-based field of youth work, the research has provided an evidence base for reforms to funding, policy and practice. The research impact is rooted in a collaborative approach, based on de St Croix's lengthy professional experience in the field, and extensive engagement with young people, youth workers and policy makers/influencers throughout the research process (planning, data collection and engagement/dissemination). Research findings are shared in a variety of accessible formats including policy briefings, blog posts, workshops at professional conferences and creative methods such as film.

Strengthening the case for new investment

In the context of spending cuts that have disproportionately affected grassroots open youth work, de St Croix's research [1,4] has helped to articulate the case for further youth work investment and amplify the voices of young people and youth workers calling for increased funding and more responsive systems of support at local and national levels of government. For example, the Chair of the Institute for Youth Work (the professional association for youth workers in England) has commented that: *"We as youth workers have been empowered by Dr de St Croix's research to push back against commissioners... Dr de St Croix's work speaks to the frame of reference that youth workers need in order to inform the agency they have in such a system"* [A].

De St Croix's research documenting and conceptualising the value of open youth work [1] was also used by the 2019 All Party Parliamentary Group on Youth Affairs as evidence of the highly skilled role played by youth workers in providing young people with trusted relationships, safe spaces and stimulating activities [B1 p.19]. Three months after its publication in April 2019, the APPG report prompted a general debate in the House of Commons on the current sufficiency of youth services, in which new funding, including GBP500,000 in bursaries for up to 400 youth work students, was announced [B2].

Informing policy: reframing accountability and evaluation in youth work

By providing evidence of the harmful effects of the policy emphasis on target cultures and outcomes measurement and demonstrating and articulating the value of alternative ways of conceptualising and practising accountability in youth work, the research [5,6] has directly contributed to moves towards more youth-centred approaches that are more in keeping with the philosophy of youth work.

For example, de St Croix has worked in partnership with the Centre for Youth Impact, which was set up by the Cabinet Office in 2014 to encourage impact measurement in youth organisations and which works collaboratively with practitioners, funders and policymakers to improve services and support for young people across the UK. Influenced by the research [2,5] and through a 'critical friend' relationship with de St Croix (including regular meetings, mutual advice and invitations to speak at events and contribute to essay and blog series), the Centre for Youth Impact has moved away from recommending standardised outcome-based measurement approaches in youth work towards an approach that is more sensitive to, and better aligned with, the traditional values and practices of youth work [C1 p.18]. The Centre for Youth Impact has put this change into practice in their commissioned evaluation of one of the biggest investments in open access youth provision in recent years, the 2017-20 Youth Investment Fund [C2 p.2,4] (a joint investment between the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and The National Lottery Community Fund of GBP40,000,000 to support voluntary, community and social enterprise youth organisations to deliver, expand and create high quality local youth provision in targeted communities across England). Rather than imposing a model of evaluation from outside and

restricting the evaluation to outcomes measures, they have taken a participatory approach (working in collaboration with youth organisations) and have focused on young people's feedback and indicators of quality practice, both of which were absent from government-funded youth work monitoring and evaluation in the past. The CEO of the Centre for Youth Impact, commenting on de St Croix's influence on the Centre's thinking and practice, has noted that the continuation and responsiveness of its work is due in large part to de St Croix's research: *"If we had kept trying to push out some of the ways of working that Tania critiques, we wouldn't have been around...[T]he fact that we have integrated so much of the kind of thinking that Tania represents – and tried to walk a sensitive and thoughtful line – is the reason why we exist"* [D].

Insights from the research also fed into the development of Labour Party policy ahead of the 2019 general election, through de St Croix working closely with the Political Advisor to the Shadow Youth Minister, giving advice on issues including: the distinctive contribution of grassroots open youth work; training and workforce development; challenges and opportunities in scaling up youth work after a period of under-investment; and the need for appropriate evaluation and monitoring. By identifying the danger of tying funding to quantitative outcomes, in contrast to previous Labour policy, Labour's (2019) *Only Young Once* policy paper and its subsequent 2019 manifesto committed to reversing the funding cuts and moving towards longer-term, contextually-sensitive forms of evaluation [E1]. As acknowledged by the Political Advisor to the Shadow Youth Minister *"[de St Croix's] research on accountability and evaluation processes in youth work and her informal feedback helped shape Labour's policy positions on youth work evaluation and contributed to wider youth policy development...[H]er expertise played an important role in shaping Labour's commitment outlined in the Only Young Once Report to move towards stronger, more effective evidence of youth work that focuses on the long term, moving away from previous attempts to tie quantitative measures around outcomes and impact of universal youth work. Following the publication of this report, Labour at the 2019 General Election committed to build a statutory youth service that focused on non-formal learning and ensured all young people have access to high quality youth work provision that matches their needs"* [E2].

In addition, the research findings have provided youth workers and organisations with an evidence-based rationale for more qualitative, youth-centred approaches to evaluation. Practitioners (youth workers, managers and evaluators in local government, charities and social enterprises) have widely engaged with King's research on youth work, including academic articles [especially 1,2,5], blogs, essays and talks at practitioner events, and de St Croix has held meetings with over 25 organisations rethinking their approach to evaluation. This influence on practice has been recognised by the National Youth Agency – the national body for youth work in England, with wider influence internationally – which works with youth work providers to champion youth work and raise its profile among policymakers, educators and employers; train youth workers and offer accreditation; and further facilitate youth work by arranging collaboration and funding with commercial and public sector partners. The National Youth Agency's Research and Learning Manager has acknowledged the importance of de St Croix's research and its strong impact focus, commenting that: *"de St Croix's work helps organisations think about the implications of their practice and evaluation processes in a way that considers the practical context within which youth work operates, but places individual young persons at the centre of the process ... [I]t improves the overall outcome for young people by ensuring their needs are understood as the most important element in the youth work process, and [shows] that... sometimes the 'everyday' contribution that youth work makes in young people's lives is just as valuable as the 'extraordinary.' ... [H]er mixed methodologies fill a significant gap in evaluation processes... She is regularly referenced in our advocacy reports due to the strong empirical evidence her work provides... We regularly consult with Dr de St Croix's on various matters that concern the youth sector"* [F].

Pioneering new approaches to practice

To embed research findings [5,6] in youth work, de St Croix has collaborated with charities and practitioners' groups to develop and share alternative evaluation tools. For example, in 2020 she worked with London Youth (a London-based network of 650 community youth organisations) to deliver training in qualitative interviewing for youth workers, to enable practitioners to build their skills and confidence in using qualitative research methods for evaluation. De St Croix also worked as part of In Defence of Youth Work (a grassroots practitioners' forum) to devise and implement a radically different approach to conventional quantitative evaluation – a qualitative and reflexive

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storytelling methodology. The storytelling workshop method has been used for practice development, critical professional reflection and accountability purposes by local government and third sector organisations. The approach has been shared through workshops involving 1416 participants across nine countries, and resources to run the workshop have been made available on an opensource website aimed at practitioners [G]. The workshops were developed as a form of resistance to the dominance of neoliberal outcomes measurement in youth work, as theorised by researchers including de St Croix [4], and their adaptation as a form of qualitative evaluation draws on de St Croix's articulation of the value of alternative evaluation methodologies and her research on the importance of democratic accountability [2,6].

The storytelling resource has had an impact on practice internationally. For example, a research team at Hosei University, Tokyo, who have researched the impact of youth work in Europe in order to develop youth work practice in Japan, have taken a particular interest in the storytelling methodology and invited de St Croix and a practitioner to Japan in 2019 to lead seminars with over 200 practitioners and local policy makers. The professor who led this project has acknowledged the use of this storytelling approach in Japanese youth work and described how de St Croix's work has "*helped to develop local practice and highlight ways of communicating what youth work can achieve*" [H].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- [A] Testimonial from: Chair of Institute for Youth Work (national youth sector organisation), 3 February 2021.
- [B] Documents from All Party Parliamentary Group on Youth Affairs: [B1] All Party Parliamentary Group on Youth Affairs (2019) *Youth work inquiry: Final report including recommendations and summary*. Leicester: National Youth Agency; [B2] UK Parliament. (2019). *HC Debate (24 July 2019)*. vol. 663, col. 1371.
- [C] Documents from Centre for Youth Impact: [C1] New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) & Centre for Youth Impact (2019) *Youth Investment Fund: Learning and Insight Paper One*. London: NPC; [C2] New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) & Centre for Youth Impact. (2020). *Youth Investment Fund: Learning and Insight Paper Four*. London: NPC.
- [D] Testimonial from: CEO of the Centre for Youth Impact, 3 December 2020.
- [E] Documents from the Labour Party: [E1] Labour Party (2019) *Only Young Once: The Labour Party's Vision for Rebuilding Youth Services*; [E2] Testimonial from: Former Labour Party Political Advisor to the Shadow Youth Minister, 15 February 2021.
- [F] Testimonial from: Research and Learning Manager, National Youth Agency, 3 February 2021.
- [G] In Defence of Youth Work (IDYW) (2020) *IDYW storytelling workshops: A review* [website].
- [H] Testimonial from: Professor at Hosei University, Japan, 18 November 2020.